THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
A View from the Mountain
November 28, 1999

John M. Buchanan

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ. We are preparing ourselves for the days when the nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Eternal God, through long generations you prepared a way for the coming of your Son, and by your Spirit you still bring light to illumine our paths. Renew us in faith and hope that we may welcome Christ to rule our thoughts and claim our love, as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, to whom be glory always. Amen.

Book of Common Worship
Presbyterian Church (USA)

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

A VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAIN

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 28, 1999

"I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."
(Deuteronomy 34:4)

Mark 13:32-36
Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

One of the things I like best about the great cathedrals of Europe and is that it took several centuries to build them. No one individual was there from start to finish. Generations of carpenters, roofers, stonemasons worked on them. A young boy might sign on as an apprentice, learn the trade by practicing it every day, week in and week out, year in and year out, teach his children, who would apprentice and then work beside him on the facade, or the roof, or the stone carvings, and in time a grandchild would begin the process and when the now old man died, his work would continue on and on.

Even the vision of the cathedral and the architectural plans and specs were an evolving intergenerational project. With very few exceptions, the names of the original architects and builders are not known. No one knows who built Chartres or Salisbury. (See Peter Gomes, *Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* p.158).

What invariably moves my soul about a great cathedral—Chartres, Notre Dame, Canterbury, is not only the soaring majesty, the massive size and intricate stone tracery, the sheer miracle that they were built at all, but the important fact that individuals gave the entirety of their lives to the project, individuals who were neither there at the beginning nor the end of the project

It always reminds me of something the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said:

> "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a life-time, therefore we must be saved by hope."

In his wonderful little book, *The Gifts of the Jews,* Thomas Cahill observes: "That accomplishment is intergenerational may be the deepest of all Hebrew insights." (p.170)

He was reflecting on a powerful story that happens at the conclusion of the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses is at the end of his life. He is one of the towering figures in human history. We've been using his life and experience, related mostly in the book of Exodus, to explore the topic of God and human beings in relationship, Questions People Ask About

God. Moses' life began in the midst of political terrorism when the King of Egypt ordered the slaughter of all the Jewish babies, and Moses' mother and sister placed him in a small basket, floated him on the river to be saved by Pharaoh's own daughter. Raised in the Egyptian royal household, but aware of his Hebrew identity, Moses rose through the ranks of Egyptian government. When he saw an Egyptian abusing one of his countrymen, who were now virtual slaves in Egypt, he killed the abuser and fled for his own life. He married, settled down to a shepherd's life in the wilderness where God caught up with him. A bush was burning—a voice called his name. "Moses." "Who are you?" Moses asked, and the answer is one of the most profound and enigmatic theological assertions anyone ever made: "I AM WHO I AM. I AM WHO I WILL BE."

In that ancient and remarkable formula is the beginning of monotheism and a sense of God's transcendence and mystery. Later, Moses will ask to see God fully and is allowed only to see the backside of God, not God's face. These mystical religious experiences are not, that is to say, for Moses' entertainment or spiritual satisfaction. God comes to Moses in order to get Moses to do something.

The voice orders Moses to return to Egypt to lead his people to freedom. Moses argues, whines, makes excuses, doubts, and finally does it, leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, through the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit, into the wilderness. Now the reluctant military liberator has to become a politician. The people are frightened, hungry, thirsty—Moses must convince them that the risks and hardships of freedom are better than the security of slavery.

Through the barren wasteland of the Sinai peninsula the entire company travels—for decades—a pilgrim people, on the move, from camp site to camp site, oasis to oasis, up and down the peninsula, actually, as if their traveling without a home had a point in itself. At Sinai, Moses' mysterious relationship with the "I AM WHO I AM," voice continues. A law is given, a covenant made—and broken—and renewed. And the pilgrimage continues.

Now it is almost over. They have arrived at Mt. Nebo, a striking outcrop to the east of the Dead Sea near Jericho. From its heights you can see in all four directions—a breathtaking view of the land behind and ahead, the promised land; the past and the future.

Moses is not going to enter the land he has been pursuing for 40 years; he will not personally experience the completion of the project that has required everything of him, skill, courage, strength, creativity. Moses' work is done. Or more accurately, Moses' part of God's work of creation is at an end. And Moses, his eyes undimmed, his vigor undiminished, having seen the promised land from the mountain, dies. He is buried somewhere there. The people mourn his death for thirty days and then move on into their future with a new leader.

"Nothing worth doing can be completed in a life time."

There is a sense in which our experience could not be more different from Moses, an almost mythological figure, larger than life. I'll never forget seeing Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses—at the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome. It is huge, Moses is old, but his

arms are powerfully muscled; he sits but is obviously ready to stride into the future. His beard and head of hair are full on his massive head. His eyes are piercing. He can face his own death unafraid.

The late Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago, preached an elegant sermon to students on this text, and said that for thoughtful people, intellectually alive people, religious faith is a lot like Moses seeing but not entering the promised land. There are many of us, Sittler said, who have a vision of what faith should be, but do not personally experience it with the same degree of certainty and blessed assurance as others—and who feel deprived. "Moses on Mt. Nebo," he wrote, "is a man in the situation of many of us who must confess and serve a faith whose gifts to us are not given with all the opulence we might desire. It is okay to be part of the building process, even though you may not be able to see the finished product. It is alright to know and yet not to know," Sittler said. (*The Care of the Earth,* p.84)

Moses is larger than life, but Thomas Cahill argues that on Mt. Nebo he is every one of us. "In this ending, we can feel a basic human kinship . . .We too shall die without finishing what we began." (p.169)

It's a good thing to remember and acknowledge and even celebrate. The important work you and I are privileged to do, our business, our profession, in education, in the arts, in our families, began long ago, before us, and by God's grace will continue after we are gone. It's a definition of the church that I love, a chorus singing God's praises from all eternity, and we are privileged to join during our lifetime. But the music was there before we added our voices, and will continue after our voices are silent.

What we care about and deeply love and work to strengthen and preserve will go on after us: the church, the nation, the institutions we love, our business, profession, our family. Peter Gomes said, "Few of us can orchestrate the conclusion o four lives; and all of us will die with our work undone, our dreams not yet achieved. We may not be able to make an end, but by God's grace we are able to make a beginning, and that is no small thing." (op.cit. p.158)

I gain a sense of that every year at this time. This past week, many of us, perhaps most of us, did some looking back and looking forward. The Thanksgiving respite coming as it does at the beginning of the very busiest time of the year, somehow puts us in touch with our own history: our parents and children, our grandparents and grandchildren, our brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, with parents who loved us into being and formed and shaped us with their hopes and aspirations, and grandparents who shaped them, and great grandparents who shaped our grandparents, and that's about as far as most of us can take it, but the line stretches far into the silent past and into a future we cannot see.

And somewhere in all of that there is a view from the mountain, past and future, and a sense that we are part of a history bigger than our own, that the story of our own families begins before us, includes us for a while and will go on after us, and that the story of our

families is itself part of a larger story of the human race and of God and of God's mysterious, wondrous relationship with the whole project.

Whenever I read or hear the story of Moses on Mt. Nebo, or see a picture of Michelangelo's magnificent sculpture, I think of my grandfather Buchanan, my father's father. "Pop" we called him, a big, strong man who worked in the Pennsylvania Railroad steam engine shop, worked all his life building the K4 and other workhorse steam engines of American railroading He had big arms and hands and shoulders, pure white hair, enormous ears, smoked a pipe, and lived well into his nineties. I was a young minister when he began his final ascent to Mt. Nebo. Home on vacation, my father and I went to see him; my Dad went daily to take care of him. He was bedfast now, sitting up, looking out his window. We talked about family, the weather, baseball, the future. "It's almost over for me," he said. "But not for you—and I'm proud of what you are." My father asked me to pray, which I did. We kissed him goodbye. I would not see him again. He knew it, and so did I. As we left, he raised his hand in what amounted to a kind of blessing, I always thought, and said a line from a hymn he must have sung a thousand times "God be with you till we meet again, Johnny."

At one level, this is about time and our mortality and the promises of God.

Author Reynolds Price, writing out of his own experience with cancer and therefore his own mortality, to a young man who was dying, said:

"All I'll append in closing this is another old claim—that, beyond a doubt, the Creator is more mysterious than we can expect—or comprehend . . that a created universe which has evolved the staggering richness of life that we observe on this planet, can scarcely permit that phenomenon to die in eventual cold silence like a candle forgotten in a room deserted by all other life. . .If forced to speculate, I'd have to say that you are headed for a goodness you can't avoid . . . that

> all shall be well and
> all manner of thing shall be well."

But at another level, this is about much, much more than us and our mortality.

What do you suppose Moses saw from the heights of Mt. Nebo? He could see Jericho, of course. He could see the Dead Sea to the west and the great plain immediately to the North. I think he saw more than that. I think he saw, for a moment at least, all the way to Judah, to a little town called Bethlehem. I think he saw and knew that God's work of creating and redeeming creation would go on, that his labor was not in vain. I think he saw across the miles and the centuries, to the birth of one of his people, Jesus. He saw all the way to that place in whose dark streets shone an everlasting light, and in which the hopes and fears of all the years are met that night.

And so, you and I, sitting in church on the first Sunday in Advent, at the end of the 20th century and the second millenium, thinking about the past and the future . . .

"Nothing worth doing," the great theologian said, "can be accomplished in a life time; therefore we must be saved by hope," and went on: "Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love."

And we are saved by a love that accompanies us all our days; love that forgives our sins, and wipes tears from our eyes; love that opens us to the beauty of life; love that inspires us to work for God's kingdom to come while we live and to trust God to bring it to completion; love come down in a birth in Bethlehem.

Thanks be to God. Amen.